



Pick Your Path to Health

Make Physical Activity a Family Thing

Building a strong family. Everybody's for it—politicians talk about it, ministers praise it, therapists stress the need for it. But it's up to you to do it and the big question is how.

For African American families, getting the family to exercise together is one way to stay strong. And it may be the simplest way to keep disease away.

Diabetes, high blood pressure, and others—are strongly linked to diet, obesity, and lack of exercise. Studies are beginning to show that this lack of exercise (combined with a diet high in fat and sugar) in childhood can increase your risk of developing these health problems earlier in life. So the sooner your family starts, the better!

How Do We Start?

For Ann Dickenson, an accountant, wife, and mother of two children, getting away to hike with her family on the weekends is part of the answer. "Exercising together serves many purposes: we all get healthier, share wholesome experiences, and keep the kids off the couch and away from the TV," she says. She and her teen-age daughter often take exercise classes together, and the whole family goes swimming whenever they get the chance.

One of the easiest ways for a family to exercise is to walk together—whether to church, around the neighborhood, or to the park. If you have a school nearby, the adults can walk or jog around the exercise field while the children play in the middle. Many towns and counties have regular walking programs and if you are fortunate enough to live near a park or nature area, there are often family programs run by your city or county that involve getting outside into fresh air and getting to know nature.

If you have bikes (and helmets), haul them out and spend a couple of hours biking. If your children are too little to keep up but like riding their bikes, walk or jog while they ride. If new children's bikes are too much for your budget, check with friends or neighbors whose children are slightly older than yours—chances are they will have some used bikes hanging around. Rollerblading is a great workout and with helmet and knee, elbow, and wrist pads, safe enough for all ages. If you live someplace cold,

consider ice skating—most rinks rent skates and everyone can go at their own speed.

Get involved in your children's sports. If your son or daughter plays softball, pitch to them. If basketball is their interest, find a local recreation center and play ball with them. Soccer is easy for everyone to try—even preschool kids can kick balls around. Playing doubles tennis can be fun, and many community courts are free. And what about turning a jump rope or try jumping yourself—it's not so easy when you're an adult, but you may be able to show your daughter a thing or two, and it's great for the heart.

Although it's sometimes tough to get the kids to help out, housework is exercise. Sweeping, vacuuming, polishing furniture, even dusting can be a workout when you insist that they get the mop or dust cloth up into those corners and down under the furniture. Washing windows, washing the car, shoveling snow, and grooming and walking the dog are ways to help with the chores and move around. And gardening can be fun for younger children and a way to interest them in nature.

Music is always a great way to get people moving. Put on your favorite tunes and dance around with your children. Exercise videotapes are another way to get going—they allow you to set up a regular exercise program and little ones love to imitate mom bending and stretching (and sometimes have a good laugh at mom's expense). Chances are your neighborhood has exercise or sports facilities or classes, as does the local "Y," or community center and may provide daycare for toddlers.

Swimming is terrific—regardless of the time of year. Many communities have indoor pools that are open all year around, and nothing feels better than being in warm, moist air when it's cold outside. If you are an adult who doesn't know how to swim, winter is a good time to learn, and also to show your kids that you're not afraid to try new things.

It's important to try and stay active regularly. And that's the tough part. Most of us are so busy and stressed every day that the thought of adding one more thing that "should" be done makes it easy to ignore. But if you're feeling exhausted and worn out at the end of the day, exercising can give all of you more energy. The U.S. Surgeon General recommends at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. You can break your exercise into 10- or 15-minute segments two to three times a day.

Exercising together as a family is a wonderful way to help your family be together longer—now and in the future. So get your family together and lead them down a path to better health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."